

# CHINA'S PAK. INVESTMENTS TAKE A MILITARY TURN

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: Effect of policies and politics of developing countries on India's interests

Closely bound: Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing in November. AP Thomas Peter

When U.S. President Donald Trump started the new year by suspending billions of dollars of security aid to Pakistan, one theory was that it would scare the Pakistani military into cooperating better with its U.S. allies.

The reality was that Pakistan already had a replacement sponsor lined up.

Just two weeks later, the Pakistani Air Force and Chinese officials were putting the final touches on a secret proposal to expand Pakistan's building of Chinese military jets, weaponry and other hardware.

The confidential plan, reviewed by *The New York Times*, would also deepen the cooperation between China and Pakistan in space, a frontier the Pentagon recently said Beijing was trying to militarise after decades of playing catch-up.

All those military projects were designated as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a chain of infrastructure development programmes stretching across some 70 countries, built and financed by Beijing.

Chinese officials have repeatedly said the Belt and Road is purely an economic project with peaceful intent. But with its plan for Pakistan, China is for the first time explicitly tying a Belt and Road proposal to its military ambitions.

Since the beginning of the BRI in 2013, Pakistan has been the programme's flagship site, with some \$62 billion in projects planned in the so-called China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). In the process, China has lent more and more money to Pakistan at a time of economic desperation there, binding the two countries ever closer.

For the most part, Pakistan has eagerly turned more toward China as the chill with the U.S. has deepened. Some Pakistani officials are growing concerned about losing sovereignty to their deep-pocketed Asian ally, but the host of ways the two countries are now bound together may leave Pakistan with little choice but to go along.

Even before the revelation of the new Chinese-Pakistani military cooperation, some of China's biggest projects in Pakistan had clear strategic implications.

## Strategic card

A Chinese-built seaport and special economic zone in the Pakistani town of Gwadar is rooted in trade, giving China a quicker route to get goods to the Arabian Sea. But it also gives Beijing a strategic card to play against India and the U.S. if tensions worsen to the point of naval blockades as the two powers increasingly confront each other at sea.

A less scrutinised component of BRI is the central role Pakistan plays in China's Beidou satellite navigation system. Pakistan is the only other country that has been granted access to the

system's military service, allowing more precise guidance for missiles, ships and aircraft. The tightening China-Pakistan security alliance has gained momentum on a long road to the Arabian Sea. In 2015, under BRI, China took a nascent port in the Pakistani coastal town of Gwadar and supercharged the project with an estimated \$800 million development plan that included a large SEZ for Chinese companies.

Linking the port to western China would be a new 2,000-mile network of highways and rails through the Balochistan province, a resource-rich region plagued by militancy.

### **Naval footprint**

The public vision for the project was that it would allow Chinese goods to bypass much longer and more expensive shipping routes through the Indian Ocean and avoid the territorial waters of several U.S. allies in Asia.

Military analysts predict that China could use Gwadar to expand the naval footprint of its attack submarines, after agreeing in 2015 to sell eight submarines to Pakistan in a deal worth up to \$6 billion. China could use the equipment it sells to the South Asian country to refuel its own submarines, extending its Navy's global reach.

According to the undisclosed proposal drawn up by the Pakistani Air Force and Chinese officials at the start of the year, an SEZ under the CPEC would be created in Pakistan to produce a new generation of fighter jets. For the first time, navigation systems, radar systems and onboard weapons would be built jointly by the countries at factories in Pakistan.

The proposal, confirmed by officials at the Ministry of Planning and Development, would expand China and Pakistan's current cooperation on the JF-17 fighter jet, which is assembled at Pakistan's military-run Kamra Aeronautical Complex in Punjab province. The Chinese-designed jets have given Pakistan an alternative to the U.S.-built F-16 fighters. NYTimes

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